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DEVELOPING CREATIVE ACTIVITY OF SOCIO-HUMANITIES STUDENTS: FACULTY MEMBERS' PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This paper analyzes how and to what extend socio-humanities' faculty members in Russia develop students' creative activity by the means of information educational environment (IEE). The relevance of this problem is proven due to the contradiction between current demands of the digital economy labour market and low digital competence of socio-humanities graduates. We argue that under the conditions of digital economy creativity can become a key competence for socio-humanities graduates; however in the domain of education we suggest the use of the term "creative activity". To understand the level of awareness of this problem among socio-humanities faculty members, as well as their attitude towards developing students' creativity through the interaction with the electronic means of the IEE, we conducted a pilot survey among 25 faculty members of two major St. Petersburg universities specializing in socio-humanistic studies. Our results demonstrated a positive outlook on work with the IEE, a high level of confidence in online activities being a means to develop students' universal skills. We also learned about the tools that are currently used by the respondents to develop their students' creative activity. In conclusion we suggest the importance of further pedagogical research to develop a systematic pedagogical approach to the problem.

1. Introduction

One of the main challenges of classical universities across the globe nowadays is the ever-expanding gap between their curricula and labor market demands. The faster the technology develops, the more drastic this contrast becomes. It becomes even more evident in the field of socio-humanities.

This issue has been addressed by a number of scholars in different countries.

Louvel (2007) considered the case of France: how the Bologna Process impacted the national system of higher education and specifically humanitarian education. Her findings demonstrate that humanities graduates have to overcome two main problems: they are either overqualified for a job or have to compete with graduates of management, administration and other labour market-oriented majors.

A longitudinal study by Welch and Long (2014), Masola (2016), made among the humanities Ph.D. holders who had graduated from Pennsylvania State University since 1996 demonstrated a similar tendency: the number of humanities Ph.D. holders employed in non-academic fields, who had graduated from the university in 2008-13, has decreased from 19% to 6%. Such a drop was partly explained by the recession of 2008, nevertheless resulting in the same lack of employment options.

A recent survey conducted by Tikhomirov and Sidneva (2017) among the Moscow graduates who had received their first degree in socio-humanities in 2014-2016 showed that 76% of them managed to find a job, whereas only 28% found a job related to their major and only 3% could start their own business.

Overall, researchers suggest two main ways of solving this problem. The first implies a change in the educational system (early professionalization, compulsory collaboration with potential employers, etc.), the second one covers the pedagogical aspect of developing innovative teaching methods to give socio-humanities graduates significant advantages in the current labour market.

Even though, arguably, it is the change in the system that can contribute the most to the solution, it can take years in time, provided the condition of an immediate start. However, during those years new generations of students of humanities will enter and graduate from universities all over the world. Thus, as educators, we are obliged to take action, available to anyone and effective enough; which leaves us with the second option: developing innovative teaching methods.

2. Problem Statement

If we take a closer look at the current market conditions, we are likely to encounter such terms as: "post-industrial economy", "knowledge economy", "creative industries", etc. Generally, they refer to the rule of so-called "creative capital" (Harris, 2014), characterized by the shift towards creativity as a substantially valuable commodity (Harris, 2016). This became more prominent with the rapid development of an information society and business digitalization.

In Russia, this process led to the adoption of the government program "Digital Economy of the Russian Federation", which among other points, defined a strategic goal for the higher education system, namely, developing universities' information educational environment (IEE). This resulted in a dramatic increase of MOOCs: currently there are 1116 MOOCs offered by 125 local universities (Modern digital educational environment in the Russian Federation, n.d.). Thus, more and more traditional in-class activities

are moved to the IEEt. The industry responded to it with various studies about psychological and pedagogical conditions for such work.

Taking it into account, one would expect a high level of digital competence among young graduates. And yet, the above mentioned study of Tikhomirov and Sidneva (2017), demonstrated that unemployed humanities graduates blame their unfortunate state not on the market conditions, but on the quality of their education. They mention the lack of in-field training, an unsatisfying level of foreign languages instruction and a low level of their digital competence (the last two being the most common job requirements among employers).

Under the conditions of a fast developing digital economy, having a developed digital competence is crucial for a majority of workers in various fields, including humanities. And the factor of creativity as a valuable commodity brings yet another perspective: the most called for specialists would be those who are capable of creating innovative products with the use of information technologies, which appear in three modes: 1) a tool, 2) an environment, 3) a product (depending on the representation of a new product).

Therefore, we argue that the educational process happening in universities, if moved to the information educational environment, must serve as a preparation for graduates' future activity as subjects of the digital economy, so that they could use creativity to develop their own innovative products.

Since what is meant by "creativity" in this case is closely connected with economic affairs, we argue that using this term in a pedagogical study would narrow down our field of observation. Education implies not only forming a set of valuable competences, but also developing students' personalities. This means, that in the educational context it would be more correct to use the term "creative activity" rather than "creativity". Creative activity in Russian pedagogy is most commonly defined as an integrative quality of a personality expressed as originality, productivity and innovation in the learning process (Bezrukova, 2000).

Thus, to solve the problem of a high unemployment level among socio-humanities graduates against the backdrop of digital economy, we argue that most of the learning activities performed by students in the information educational environment should be organized in a way to develop students' creative activity.

3. Research Questions

Currently, there are several research trends concerning online education in Russia. They include studies on social networks as a pedagogical tool (Bordovskaia, Tulupyeva, Tulupyev, & Azarov, 2016), upbringing through digital education (Golovanova, 2019), mobile devices and augmented reality technology in education (Zhebrovskaya, Pivnenko, & Efimova, 2017), lifelong learning and elderly people integration into the digital environment (Darinskaia & Moskvicheva, 2017), etc.

We would like to consider it from the point of view of future graduates of socio-humanities: how their work in information educational environment can be organized to help develop their creative activity, which later helps them use their creativity as a valuable tool to create innovative products in the digital economy conditions.

In this survey, we would like to concentrate on the current state of events, narrowing down our main research question to the following: is modern information educational environment used for developing creative activity of socio-humanities' students? If yes, which tools do faculty members use to achieve it?

4.   Purpose of the Study

In order to understand, to what extend information educational environment (IEE) of Russian universities is used to develop creative activity of socio-humanities undergraduates and whether faculty members perceive it as an environment stimulating their students' creative activity, the following pilot survey was conducted.

5.   Research Methods

The survey in a form of a questionnaire was conducted in November-December of 2018 on the basis of St Petersburg State University's Institute of Philosophy and Institute of Foreign Languages and Oriental Institute of the Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia. We arranged it among 25 faculty members specializing in socio-humanistic studies (philosophy, pedagogy, linguistics, psychology). Their average academic teaching experience totalled 13 years, average age – 40.5 years old.

Faculty members were asked the following questions: "Do you use electronic means of information-educational environment in your work?", "Which learning activities do you bring to the information-educational environment?", "In your opinion, which skills of the students can be developed through the implementation of the electronic means of information-educational environment in the learning process?", "If by 'creative activity' of students we understand an integrative quality of a personality, expressed as originality, productivity and innovation in the learning process, do you pay attention to its development?".

6.   Findings

The question "Do you use electronic means of information-educational environment in your professional activity?" was answered positively by 98% of the respondents. The most popular electronic means were: MOOCs, other online courses (66%) and electronic textbooks (52%). A special mention was given to Android and IOS applications (1%) and electronic grade books (1%).

The question: "Which learning activities do you bring to the information-educational environment?" was answered the following way: the majority chose "homework" (68%) and "academic performance control" (40%). Less populars answers were: surveys (1%), illustrative materials (1%), group homework (1%).

The answers for the question: "In your opinion, which skills of the students can be developed through the implementation of the electronic means of information-educational environment in the learning process?" can be divided into five groups: 1) creative skills; 2) research skills; 3) work with information; 4) self-control; 5) self study.

It is interesting, that not all of the respondents gave an optimistic answer. Some faculty members noted, that the work in the IEE implies "looking for new ways of cheating". Others, expressing doubt in the resources of the IEE for special skills development, add that it is mainly used for convenience: it allows you to work with students who do not attend real life classes.

The answers for the question "If by 'creative activity' of students we understand an integrative quality of a personality, expressed as originality, productivity and innovation in the learning process, do you pay attention to its development?" were given in the following way (Figure 01):
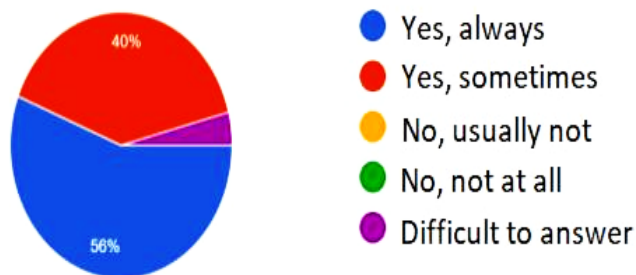
Figure 01. "If by 'creative activity' of students we understand an integrative quality of a personality, expressed as originality, productivity and innovation in the learning process, do you pay attention to its development?"

Then the respondents gave some examples of their students expressing creative activity from their teaching practice. The most common answers included: project work, interactive classes (case method, role play, debates, quizzes), contests, creating media content.

The answers for the question "In your opinion, which skills of the students can be developed through the implementation of the electronic means of information-educational environment in the learning process?" can be divided into seven groups: 1) flexibility; 2) readiness for self-development; 3) endurance; 4) curiosity; 5) self study; 6) sense of humour; 7) being a creative person.

The last answer was the most popular one. 52% of the faculty members specifically noted that to help students develop their creative activity a teacher must himself be a creative person.

7. Conclusion

The survey conducted among faculty members involved in teaching socio-humanistic disciplines demonstrated the following:

▪ a high of faculty members' involvement into the work with the information educational environment (IEE);

▪ a generally positive attitude towards the IEE as a means of developing students' skills;

▪ a number of individually tested ways of using electronic means of the IEE for the development of students' creative activity (e.g. to create media content).

Thus, what we found during our pilot survey was a general awareness of the surveyed faculty members about the necessity of students' creative activity development. However, the tools they use depend mostly on faculty members' individual initiative, lacking a systematic pedagogical approach. Therefore, this question requires further pedagogical and psychological investigation in order to develop an effective methodology for developing students' creative activity in the information educational environment.

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